**Conservative Resurgence 1970s-1980s**

**Background:**

Under the Nixon, Reagan, and Ford Administrations, conservatism made a resurgence following the wide-spread liberalization of American public life under the Kennedy and Johnson administration. The conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s was a direct reaction against the shifting size and scope of the government promoted by Kennedy and Johnson. In particular, conservatives took issues with several aspects of the 1960s liberal agenda. First, the viewed the promotion of civil rights for blacks, women, and in some instances gays, not as efforts to increase equality, but as creating special privileges for a subset of Americans at the direct expense of the rights enjoyed by the “silent majority”—middle class whites. Second, they viewed the promotion of these “special rights” as attempts by the government to promote a dangerous, secular, anti-family, and immoral value system, by facilitating and subsidizing female employment, single motherhood, and homosexuality. Third, they viewed the government as becoming too large (in terms of bureaucracy and spending) by raising taxes and creating agencies with the express intent of promoting these immoral values. Finally, as a result of their perception of the government as promoting an immoral special rights agenda, conservatives of the 1970s began to adopt a new view of the government as a *malicious* obstacleto freedom. While past conservatives movements like those in the 1920s tended view the government as a barrier to economic freedom, they viewed the government as essentially benign; an unnecessary roadblock on the path to freedom. By the 1970s, however, conservatives took a different view of government. Rather than view the government as an impediment to freedom and self-sufficiency, they began to view the government as parasitic to freedom—the government isn’t merely in the way of freedom, the government is an agent to undo our freedom. In the words, of Reagan, “government is not the solution to our problem, government IS the problem.” This view of government as destroyer of freedom led conservatives to redefine American freedom as a freedom from government; a message which resonated with the American people. Once in power, they therefore began a process of “hollowing out” of government agencies, where they retained many of the main the New Deal and Great Society bureaucracies (largely because these agencies had become accepted by the American population as immutable), but staffed them with individuals who believed in small government politics and laissez-faire economics thus rendering these institutions ineffective.

**Key Concepts:**

* *Incorporation of Family Values into the Republican Party*
  + Conservatives saw the Great Society as permitting the breakdown of the family through its social welfare policies
  + Gov’t expansion under Johnson denounced as a liberal scheme to empower alternative family arrangements (single-motherhood, female employment, homosexuality)
  + Gov’t had gotten too big and too involved in promoting a liberal family agenda
  + People now were demanding all of these “special rights” from their government.
    - National health insurance, the ERA, universal daycare, extension of social security to homemakers, non-discrimination against lesbians
  + Gov’t’s promotion of equal rights under Roosevelt and Johnson had now given way to the promotion of special rights (which Johnson begins)
  + For conservatives: “the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans” defined as the decent and hard-working people whose traditional moral values sustained the nation by giving “lift to the American dream.” Their role in America has been pushed to the sidelines as the government increasingly advocated the special rights of a few at the expense of the rights of the hard-working majority
  + Instead belief is that the money of hardworking Americans is being taxed to pay for welfare queens, feminist daycares, and birth control pills for teenagers.
* *View of the Role of the Government*
  + For conservatives of the 1970s the government exists as a malicious institution designed to take freedom (measured in terms of rights and money) away from hardworking average Americans (read: white middle class Americans), and give them to certain special groups (blacks, women, homosexuals).
  + The government thus promotes an immoral agenda at the expense of moral, upstanding Americans.
* *Efforts to “Hollow Out” The Government*
  + Therefore, because the government has become an agenda of a secular, liberal agenda, it must be undone.
  + However, because many Americans have come to rely on certain government agencies and intervention, they can’t simply be eliminated. Rather, conservatives realize that to reduce the size of the government, they must instead hollow it out. Retain these agencies but render them ineffective by staffing them with individuals who actually don’t believe in the agencies.
  + “Unable to completely retrench the American state that had emerged in the New Deal and the Great Society, conservatives learned that they would have to work at limiting and containing government by controlling the levers of power. During the 1970s, conservatism was transformed from an opposition ideology premised on radically eliminating government to an ideology of officeholders who struggled to contain and gradually undermine the government they so vehemently mistrusted.”
* *Endorsement of the Free-Market*
  + As part of the process of hollowing out the government, conservatives promote a free-market ideology. They seek to move many public functions back to the private market.
  + For example, the management of the oil crisis by Nixon saw the creation of a Federal Energy Office, which was headed by William Simon who, through a government agency, applied free market solutions to the energy crisis.